

Language in a Japanese University Community

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Abstract

Language use in Japan is highly complex. Speakers rely on finely tuned awareness of numerous conditions while engaging in communication, often adapting different levels of politeness within a single dialogue. These conditions can include location of communication, purpose of communication, and relative status of the other person -based on age, years of seniority or junior status, and membership or non-membership in a group. The university, with its numerous status makers, such as ranking of professors, division of students into separate years and student membership in additional groups, such as sports teams, provides an ideal environment to observe all the levels of linguistic politeness. For those students with less polished linguistic skills, it is proposed that the university is also an ideal environment for them to learn how to master linguistic politeness. By learning how to speak appropriately to people with different status levels in the university community students can gain a valuable linguistic skill that will help them in the post-university world of employment.

Keywords: Status quo, politeness, hierarchy, senior, junior

If one were trying to understand Japan's society through language, the complex world of status awareness and polite behaviours, one of the best places to start investigating would be in the varied educational institutions. The world of learners and instructors is an arena where it appears that the chief task is not just the passage of knowledge from one generation to the next, but also the transmission of codified language and behaviour that marks social roles. In this paper, language usage within a post-secondary educational environment will be analyzed and a partial portrait of Japan's complex society will emerge.

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Written Language: Many Japanese words connected to the world of education reveal their relationship to each other at the orthographic level because of the use of *kanji*, Chinese ideograms. We can start by looking at the verb, *manabu* (学ぶ), which means, “to learn”. The ideogram can be read as “*mana*” or “*gaku*”. It depicts, at a very abstract level, a child in a school.

The same *kanji* appears in the word for school, *gakko* (学校), and the word for student, *gakusei* (学生). The second ideogram in *gakusei* (生), means, “to live” or “be alive”, so we can think of a student as a person whose life is devoted to learning.

Seito (生徒), another word for student, is comprised of the ideogram for “to live” again, and 徒, which means, “follower”. Therefore, a student is a person who follows a teacher.

A teacher is *sensei* (先生). Again, there is the *kanji* for “to live”. The first *kanji* (先) can be read as “*saki*”, and means “ahead” or “earlier”. The second reading, “*sen*”, means “destination”. A *sensei* is someone who has gone ahead and therefore, can lead the way for the student to get to the same destination.

The next three words use some different *kanji*. They are intimately connected to the world of education in Japan. In fact, they are connected to almost all domains of life in Japan; from the time a child enters school to the day that he dies. They are *senpai* (先輩), *kohai* (後輩), and *dokyusei* (同級生).

Senpai means a “superior” or “senior”. The first *kanji* (先), the same used in *sensei*, means “ahead” or “earlier”. The second *kanji* (輩) can also be read as “*tomogara*”, and means “friend”. A *senpai* is someone who is senior, of a higher status, but also someone who is a member of one’s in-group, a friend. Perhaps the closest English word is mentor. *Kohai* means a “junior”. The first *kanji* (後) means “after” or “later” or “behind”. The second *kanji* is, again, *tomogara*. A *kohai* is someone who follows in the

footsteps of the *senpai*. A *dokyusei* is a classmate of the same grade. The first *kanji* (同) means “same”. The second *kanji* (級) means “grade” or “rank”. The last *kanji* (生) is the same used for *seito* and *sensei* and means “to live”. A *dokyusei* is a classmate who has entered school at the same time and therefore is of the same hierarchical status.

Spoken Language: Through these few words one can get a sense of the space in which learners and instructors live. Some are followers. They are behind. Some are leaders. They are ahead. Some are side by side, neither following nor leading. Some are above and some are below. There is a feeling within the space created by these words, of time and distance between the individuals which is not only marked in the written language but also in the spoken language and behaviour. It is a reflection of the vertical society (Nakane, 1970), a term used to describe the recursive hierarchy built into every level of society in Japan.

Spoken language in Japan also reflects hierarchy and can be divided into four main types or levels; *kenjo-go* (謙讓語), *teinei-go* (丁寧語), *sonkei-go* (尊敬語), and *futsu-go* (普通語). *Kenjo-go* is a language that humbles the speaker in relation to the addressee. It has also been called the object honorifics (Clarke, 2009). *Tenei-go* is formal language used with an addressee that is outside one’s group or is of higher status in one’s in-group. *Sonkei-go* is respectful/exalting language which places the addressee above one’s self. It has also been called subject honorifics (Clarke, 2009). It is considered more formal than *tenei-go*. *Futsu-go* is the casual language used between people of equal status and in informal situations. To fully function within Japanese society, each of these kinds of language must be mastered. *Futsu-go* and *teinei-go* are widely practiced but the ability to use *sonkei-go* and *kenjo-go* correctly is not so widely understood, especially among the younger members of society, even though both language forms play critical roles in Japanese society. It is an often-heard complaint amongst Japan’s older citizens when they speak of the younger generation. The young, they say, do not know how to use polite language correctly. It may be useful at this point to explain correct usage in more detail.

Speech is chosen according to the status and intimacy between the speaker and addressee. If the addressee is of higher status or is not a member of the in-group, polite language is used. Age (seniority has greater status), gender (men generally have higher status than women), group position, social rank, and the giving or receiving of favours (receiving favours places one below the giver) are all factors, which help to determine status. The changes in the language appear primarily in the verb phrase endings, the addition of auxiliary verbs and the use of honorific prefixes and titles attached to nouns, pronouns and names. In figure 1, examples of different forms of some common verbs in the present-simple tense are given.

Figure 1

Verb English	<i>Futsu-go</i>	<i>Teinei-go</i>	<i>Sonkei-go</i>	<i>Kenjo-go</i>
To do	<i>suru</i>	<i>shimasu</i>	<i>nasarimasu</i>	<i>itashimasu</i>
To be	<i>iru</i>	<i>imasu</i>	<i>irasshaimasu</i>	<i>orimasu</i>
To go	<i>iku</i>	<i>ikimasu</i>	<i>irasshaimasu</i>	<i>mairimasu</i>
To come	<i>kuru</i>	<i>kimasu</i>	<i>irasshaimasu</i>	<i>mairimasu</i>
To look at	<i>miru</i>	<i>mimasu</i>	<i>goran ni narimasu</i>	<i>haiken shimasu</i>
To eat	<i>taberu</i>	<i>tabemasu</i>	<i>Meshiagarimasu</i> <i>o-agari ni narimasu</i>	<i>itadakimasu</i>
To drink	<i>nomu</i>	<i>nomimasu</i>	<i>Meshiagarimasu</i> <i>o-agari ni narimasu</i>	<i>itadakimasu</i>

Source: Niyekawa 1991c, p.54

In figure 2 some examples of nouns with “go” and “o”, two frequently used honorifics are shown. “O” is usually used with words of Japanese origin and “go” is used with words of Chinese origin (Niyekawa, 1991).

Figure 2

prefix	Noun	English
go	<i>go-han</i>	Cooked rice, meal
	<i>go-kazoku</i>	family
o	<i>o-cha</i>	tea
	<i>o-kome</i>	uncooked rice
	<i>o-shoogatsu</i>	New Year
	<i>o-sake</i>	rice wine
	<i>o-matsuri</i>	festival
	<i>o-hashhi</i>	chopsticks
	<i>o-chawan</i>	rice bowl
	<i>o-yasumi</i>	vacation, day off
	<i>o-miyage</i>	souvenir gift

Source: Niyekawa 1991c, p, 67

To demonstrate, we can take a simple exchange and rephrase it showing the different forms of politeness. In the following five exchanges one person asks the other where they went on their holiday. The addressee replies, saying that they went to Tokyo. In each case the differences reflect the relative status of the two actors.

1. A New, young professor uses *sonkei-go* to speak to a senior professor who replies with *teinei-go*.

A: 川村先生、お休み に どこ へ いらっしゃいました か。

Kawamura sensei, o'yasumi ni doko e irrashaimashita ka.

Professor Kawamura, where did you go for the holiday?

B: 私は 東京 へ 行きました。

Watashi wa Tokyo e ikimashita.

I went to Tokyo.

2. A senior professor uses *tenei-go* to speak to a new, young professor who replies with *kenjo-go*.

A: 田中先生, 休み に どこ へ 行きました か。

Tanaka sensei, yasumi ni doko e ikimashita ka.

Professor Tanaka, where did you go for the holiday?

B: 私 は 東京 へ 参りました。

Watashi wa Tokyo e mairimashita.

I went to Tokyo.

3. A senior student (*senpai*) uses *futsu-go* to speak to a junior student (*kohai*) who replies with *tenei-go*.

A: 田中、休み に どこ へ 行った か。

Tanaka, yasumi ni doko e itta ka.

Tanaka, where did you go for the holiday?

B: 東京 へ 行きました。

Tokyo e ikimashita.

(I) went to Tokyo.

4. A junior student (*kohai*) uses *tenei-go* to speak to a senior student (*senpai*) who replies with *futsu-go*.

A: 川村さん、休み に どこ へ 行きました。

Kawamura-san, yasumi ni doko e ikimashita ka.

Mr. Kamaura, where did you go for the holiday?

B: 東京 へ 行った。

Tokyo e itta.

(I) went to Tokyo.

5. A student uses *futsu-go* to speak to another student from the same year (*dokyusei*) who replies with *futsu-go*.

A: 田中、休み に どこ へ 行った か。

Tanaka, yasumi ni doko e itta ka.

Tanaka, where did you go for the holiday?

B: 東京 へ 行った。

Tokyo e itta.

(I) went to Tokyo.

Within each exchange situation-dependent social distance is maintained between the actors and respect is directed from the lower in status to the higher in status. In the first exchange, both professors use polite speech, but in addition, the younger professor uses an even more polite form, placing the senior professor above. In the second exchange, both professors again use polite language but the younger professor uses a humble form, placing the senior professor above. In the third exchange, the senior student speaks to the junior student using casual language, who replies with polite language, placing the senior student above. In the fourth exchange, the junior student speaks to the senior student with polite language and again, the senior student replies in casual language. In the fifth exchange, both students use casual language. They can do this because both are in the same year and therefore at the same rank within the hierarchy. They need not show special respect to each other.

If any of these actors were to choose a form of language unsuited to the situation, they would be inviting some kind of social censure: unspoken character judgments and/or rebukes. In the university community rules of exchange between senior and junior students are strongly enforced especially amongst members of sports teams. A first year baseball player who fails to use polite language when speaking with a senior baseball player will be harshly criticized and told to speak with more respect next time. The following year the younger student will behave exactly the same

with new junior students. This is restricted to the sports team in-group. A baseball player will expect the members of his team to follow the rules of exchange but will not make such a demand of students outside of the baseball team.

As full members of society, and having gained a high level of education, professors, as a matter of course, are expected by all to have full mastery of the rules of exchange. If a young professor were to use language considered disrespectful to a senior professor it could be interpreted either as an expression of arrogance or an attempt to insult the senior professor. In either case, doing so could be very risky for the younger professor's career.

Conclusion: The picture that emerges out of the language used in a university setting in Japan is an inherently conservative one. Respect is systematically granted to senior members of the different student and instructor groups through everyday language exchanges. It can be said that the language is, in fact, by its very nature, the language of the establishment or status quo. Authority is constantly acknowledged and shored up through the use of different forms of polite language. It permeates all human relationships. Even students who associate exclusively with their own year classmates and who avoid club and sports activities, where the use of polite language is very active, will fall into line as they approach their fourth year of study.

Starting in the second semester of a student's third university year, the majority of time and energy is spent for post-graduation employment. The student begins with training from the university employment office. Mock interviews are held and the student learns the proper deportment and interview skills. The actual interview process itself is very lengthy.

Typically, each company offers an information meeting. If the student-applicant is interested they will come back on another day and take a written exam testing basic academic knowledge. Those who pass the written exam will be called in for a group interview. A panel of company representatives will question a group of applicants at the same time. The applicants who survive

this round will return for another interview together with a smaller group of applicants. This may be the last stage and some of the applicants are given job offers or there may be another round of interviews. The entire process is formal and, of course, standard polite language is a minimum requirement from start to finish. At the very least, students must use the “*masu*” verb ending form and “*desu*”, the standard polite form of the “be” verb.

For students, after three years of relative ease at university, the job hunt is a wake-up call to the social world that awaits them upon graduation. It is their first glimpse of corporate Japan where hierarchy and language are bound together even more tightly. The grueling job hunt may seem unnecessarily arduous to most foreign observers, but in fact, it is a test of the student’s readiness and ability to fit into the vertical work world after university. For the interviewer, it is not exclusively the student’s academic knowledge that determines the winner. It is also the student’s ability to use polite language skillfully. With that crucial tool they will blend smoothly into the company’s organizational structure, make bonds with teams of co-workers and represent the company well when meeting with clients, thereby ensuring that profitable business relationships are nurtured and maintained. One could say that perfecting polite language skills may be the most important life lesson a student receives over four years from fellow students and professors in the university community.

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